

FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

SEPTEMBER 8, 2002

THE RISING

John M. Buchanan

The tasks presented to the churches by September 11 remain unfinished. Churches need to continue to develop a theology of the religions that is ecumenical in spirit but also recognizes complexities and oppositions. The churches should enter conversations with other faith communities about common challenges.... The events call for realistic theological interpretations of what people are capable of doing.... September 11 also offers reasons to hope for renewed possibilities and communities – the routinely heroic performances of firefighters, police, government officials Now is not the time either to celebrate or lament the churches' responses. It is time to sustain theological discourse and reflection informed by renewed attention to some classic themes: human nature, the persistence of human fault, and irrepressible grace.

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**F O U R T H
P R E S B Y
T E R I A N
C H U R C H**

A LIGHT IN THE CITY



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THE RISING
September 8, 2002

John M. Buchanan, Pastor
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Psalm 5:1-8
Nehemiah 2:17-18

**“Then they said, ‘Let us start building.’
So they committed themselves to the common good”**
Nehemiah 2:18 (NRSV)

Startle us, O God, with your truth. On this first day of an important week for our nation, remind us once again, that we are not alone, that your love for the world, for all the world's people, and for us, each and every one of us, is the most powerful reality in the world and that your love is never overcome by anything we do or anything anyone does to us, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Day after day, week after week, for one year, we have been thinking about it. It has been extraordinary—this event that has so captivated, so dominated our intellects and our spirits. Day after day, week after week, for one year, we have been looking at their pictures and reading about them, and pondering . . .

- > Danny Pesce, a 34-year-old trader who was just planning to buy a new car and was about to announce his engagement
- > Melissa Harrington Hughes, who liked to travel and was going to be president of the Junior League
- > Peter Bielfeld, who loved fire trucks from the time he was five years old—right up to the day he died as a New York City firefighter
- > Susan Pinto, Vice President at Cantor Fitzgerald, who never missed her son's football and soccer games

Day after day, week after week, it has been looming over us, and now this week, the first anniversary. Whether we like it or not, we will be inundated with images, essays, reflections, opinions, and memories. Not everybody wants the experience. A newspaper cartoon suggested that the best way to observe September 11 was a full day of silence next Wednesday. Writing in *USA Today*, Gloria Witkins, a clinical psychologist, said, “I really didn't want to deal with the one-year anniversary of September 11, and I know I'm not alone.” Some people are dreading it and want us to move on. But whether we want to or not, this week we will remember and ponder and relive. CNN plans 12 hours of coverage all day Wednesday. ABC, NBC, and CBS will carry memorial services, interviews with survivors, a presidential address. The entire issue of *Time* this week is devoted to “9/11 One Year Later.” Gloria Witkins is correct. Many of us do not want to dwell on it any longer. But the psychologist wisely counsels against that temptation. Wisely she

advises that observing anniversaries can be an important part of healing and therefore both helpful and hopeful. Dr. Witkins hopes that everybody will watch and attend a service of remembrance.

Everyone has something to say. In the magazine I help to publish, the *Christian Century*, we invited our editors at large, a group of distinguished religious scholars, to express themselves on the occasion.

- > William Willimon thinks we didn't change at all and should have, that we've lost an opportunity to become a better nation.
- > Leo Lefebure observes that September 11 ushered in a new stage of Muslim-Christian relations that were a long time coming and desperately necessary.
- > Bill Placher observed that in a time that seems bereft of heroes, it was somehow good to have heroes.

Others observe the need for churches to develop a new theology that deals with religious pluralism in a more open manner, a less exclusive posture when it comes to our truth claims, more respect for and openness to the religious insights of others, acknowledgment that religious leaders now need to step up in the question of religiously motivated violence.

And everybody knows that we have learned two lessons that we didn't particularly want to learn—about our vulnerability and about our interconnectedness with the rest of the world.

And in the midst of all of that, we have come here today wondering whether there is a particularly Christian word, a biblical word—eager in fact for that word.

So may I suggest that we have seen with our own eyes the truth of the Christian doctrine of humankind, our Christian anthropology if you will. We have seen that human beings can be creatively and brilliantly evil, and we have also seen that human beings can be and often are incredibly good. We have witnessed how pride, hubris, and intolerance can translate into unthinkable cruelty. We have seen Sin with a capital S. But we have also seen the other side, the amazing human capacity for goodness, for bravery, and for self-sacrifice. We know that about ourselves in a new way, too, thanks to Todd Beamer and his fellow passengers, thanks to police officers and firefighters, thanks to rescue workers and to the young men and women of our military. We have seen how uncritical, fanatical love for one's own religion, one's nation, one's culture, when not subjected to critical reasoning, becomes hatred for the religion, nation, and culture of the other. We have seen the truth of Reinhold Niebuhr's observation that the worst human sin is religious sin, behavior that grows out of absolute certainty about what truth is—the intolerance of the religious fundamentalist.

And we have learned, in case we have forgotten, that life is precious. We do forget that, I believe. We become so preoccupied, so compulsive, so addicted, so totally devoted to accomplishing the goals we have set for ourselves—educational, athletic, professional, vocational—that we miss the fundamental miracle of our own lives. Psychologist Gloria Witkins wrote, "Although no disaster is a good disaster, this one has certainly helped me reorganize my priorities. Indeed, I'll never sweat the small stuff again. Traffic jams, slow customer service, the

daily stresses of work are not important to me anymore. What's important in my life in the wake of 9/11 are security, freedom, health, home, and family" (*USA Today*, 14 August 2002).

Each of us, I suspect, has been reminded of our own mortality. We should have known it before. Now we do. Life is a gift, a gift of God, given to each of us, an irreplaceable, one-time-only gift, lovingly fashioned, intended and bestowed by our creator. It is fragile and limited and therefore very, very precious. To waste it, to not live it fully, is somehow uniquely wrong. Martin Marty, who lives his life as fully and intentionally and generously as anyone I know, keeps a plaque on his wall that bears an inscription by Henry Frederick Amiel, a nineteenth-century Swiss philosopher. Amiel wrote it in his journal. Marty loves it and so do I.

Life is short and we have never too much time for gladdening the hearts of those who are traveling the dark journey with us. Oh, be swift to love, make haste to be kind.

And going deeper, the specifically Christian word is that God is powerfully present in the midst of suffering and tragedy and even death itself. The natural human instincts when tragedy and suffering happen are to conclude that either God created the tragedy for some divine purpose—to punish us or to teach us something—or that the very existence of tragedy and suffering repudiates the notion of a good and gracious God. It is an instinct familiar to each of us. "Why, O God, has this happened to me? Why have you done this to me?" And the distinctly Christian word is that God does not create tragedy or visit suffering on innocent people. God weeps as we weep. God grieves when the beauty of creation is violated and the precious, priceless gift of human life is crushed. God is present in tragedy and suffering. That's why our symbol is a cross. The man dying on the cross is not just a symbol of human cruelty and stupidity and selfishness. The cross, we believe, is supremely the symbol of God's love and the redemptive, transforming power of suffering love. In his *Christian Century* essay, William Willimon, puts it this way: "There was, we Christians keep trying to believe, only one day that changed our world forever and that was a Friday, not a Tuesday. On that day, suffering love was revealed to be stronger than death and God, not nations, the ruler."

And there is a Christian word in the midst of all the other words that will be spoken this week, about hope, about resurrection, about building the future, a word about *The Rising*. That is, some of you will know, the title of a new Bruce Springsteen CD. Springsteen wrote 13 songs after September 11, songs that, the *New Yorker* magazine reviewer observed, use the language of faith, redemption, and love; songs that express the yearning for connection and intimacy in the human heart, a sense of human mortality, and also songs about human perseverance—the ability to stand back up, brush off, and go back to work, to build a new future—as the greatest heroism. The title song, "The Rising," is about a New York City firefighter climbing up the dark, smoke-filled stairwell of the World Trade Center, carrying a fire hose on his back and suddenly realizing that there is no way out, no way at all but up.

Can't see nothin' in front of me
Can't see nothin' coming up behind
I make my own way through the darkness
... lost track of how far I've gone.

And then to his beloved he says

Come on up for the rising
Come on up, lay your hands in mine
Come on up for the rising.

It is the fundamental Christian word, the Easter word, the word of life more powerful than death, of hope more powerful than despair. And it's there, in the Bible, in our tradition from the very beginning.

Six centuries before Christ, the Jewish exiles were living in captivity in Babylon. Their nation had been defeated, overwhelmed by foreign armies, their young men killed. The victors had destroyed their beloved capital, intentionally leveled their temple, and torn down the city wall to make a point about power and security. The exiles were slowly returning. At the beginning of the book of Nehemiah it says, "The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame: the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire."

Nehemiah, who had become a minor functionary in the royal court of Babylon, heard about the devastation back in Jerusalem. He was so overwhelmed, so depressed, that he wept for days on end. But he did not merely weep. He prayed to God, and then he got up and acted: asked the king for permission to go to Jerusalem, made the long journey, surreptitiously surveyed the damage, and gathered the discouraged, weary survivors who were paralyzed by grief and fear and said:

You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruin with its gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the wall.

Nehemiah reminded them that there is a God, that God is gracious, that God's love is the ultimate reality about which they need to be concerned.

And resurrection began to happen in the midst of that defeated, depressed, discouraged band of survivors.

"Let us start to build," they said. "Let us rise up and build." "And so they strengthened their hands for the good work. . . . they committed themselves to the common good." "Brick by brick, beam by beam, section by section, they built. And in the process they were healed and hope was restored to their community" (Kurt Schmoke in *What's God Got to Do with the American Experiment? Learning from Nehemiah*, p. 67).

For those of us who stand beneath that cross and who live our lives in the bright, mysterious light of resurrection, the future where our God calls us to be, and our Lord calls us to follow, is full of hope. Because of that hope, we baptize our babies and teach and nurture and tutor and love our children and the children of our neighborhood and city and work for a better, more just, more peaceful world for them and their children.

Let me tell you a story about hope. On September 12, 2001, a child was born in China, a baby girl. For one reason or another she ended up in a state orphanage, where she remained for a year. Just a month ago, a man and woman from Chicago, from this congregation, flew to China, made their way many miles to the orphanage, met the baby, stayed while all the paper work was completed, and then retraced their steps and flew home with her. And somewhere in the middle of all that they became her new parents and she became their child. They decided to name her Grace. That's hope, the resilient hope that knows that love is the most powerful force in the world.

Because of that hope we live with courage and commitment, rebuilding what has been destroyed, reclaiming what has been forgotten and ignored—poor people, marginalized people. Because of that hope we will never abandon our commitment to our neighbors, our love for the world, our devotion to Christ's mission of healing and reconciling and recreating and rebuilding in the world. We will rise up and build.

Because of that hope we will try, in the midst of our busy lives, to remember, at least once a day, how very precious our life is, and we will be swift to love and make haste to be kind.

And because of that hope, we will never forget that love, God's love in Jesus Christ, is more powerful than death.

Can't see nothing in front of me
Can't see nothin' coming up behind.
I make my own way through the darkness
. . . lost track of how far I've gone
. . . how high I've climbed.
Come on up for the rising.
Come on up, lay your hands in mine.
Come on up for the rising.

Amen.

Prayers of the People

By Dana Ferguson, Associate Pastor for Mission

God of all ages, of what has been and what should not have been, of what was hoped for and what was never imagined, of what might be and what can be, we come to you this day remembering—remembering the innocence that was and the lives that were lost. We have begun to learn what it means to live in times when our world will never be the same again. A hole was ripped into the landscape of this country, and even a year later, when the debris of buildings and planes has been cleared; wounds of this country and the wreckage of individuals' lives seem all too fresh. And so we pray this day for the grieving, who put one foot in front of the other and move into another day; for those who for months were a part of the family of the recovery workers at Ground Zero and now are learning to again be a part of the family of the living; for leaders who have struggled to make decisions of integrity in the shadow of grave evil; for those

who cannot shake the nightmares in the night; and for those who faraway continue to live in the midst of warfare.

Draw us to the well of faith that sustained generations through all times—through famine and warfare, terror and trauma, vengeance and violence. Now that the dust of the demise has settled and the sky is clear, give us a clear picture of who you are in this world and who you would have us be. When we are tempted to remember only the pictures of hate in burning buildings, put before us a picture of love and determination known through grief shared, prayers uttered, doors opened, hands outstretched, and lives rearranged to care for survivors. When we are tempted to look in the closets of clothes untouched for a year and remember only the dead, put before us a picture of clothes for the young worn thin from living and laughing, learning and loving. When we are tempted to look skyward in fear, let us see a sky of love, a sky of mercy, a sky of glory, and dream a life of goodness and of grace. If we yearn an eye for an eye, remind us that your justice does not equal human vengeance. Let us not act according to what has been done *to* us but what has been done *for* us in Jesus Christ. In so doing, may the memories of those past make us better for the generations to come. May their strength give us strength; may their faith give us faith; may their hope give us hope; may their love bring us love.

Remind us, O God, not only of our obligation to those gone before us but also to those to come. Let us tell the stories of goodness and giving so that they might not remember only stories of hatred. Let us not lose faith in your power to bring new life in the midst of darkness, to rise up among us in goodness and dignity, in human lives valued and communities that live to serve one another. Make us stronger to build a world full of love and compassion, hope and promise, that it might be known through the actions of the people of this world that goodness is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate, light is stronger than darkness, truth is stronger than lies. For we pray this and all things for the sake of your people and in the name of Jesus Christ saying, Our Father . . .

(Portions of this prayer taken from “The Rising” by Bruce Springsteen.)